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SIMON VESTDIJK: DUTCH CRITIC OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

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The critical writings on American works or writers constitute only a relatively small section in the voluminous and variegated oeuvre of Simon Vestdijk (1898-1971), leading twentieth-century Dutch novelist, poet, and essayist. Quantity, however, cannot here be taken as an index to quality or substance, for among Vestdijk's writings on American literature are essays of crucial importance, not only, as Dutch literary scholars have noticed, for the development of Vestdijk's own poetics, but also for the role Vestdijk played in introducing American writers to a Dutch audience.

Besides translations of poetry by Emily Dickinson and stories by Edgar Allan Poe (*Fantastische vertellingen*, 1941), Vestdijk's writings on American literature can be divided into two categories. First, in the early 1930s, on the threshold of his own writing career, he wrote two fully-fledged literary essays on the poetry of Dickinson (1932) and Edwin Arlington Robinson (1933), which were central to the development of his own poetics. Second, between 1935 and 1951, he recurrently wrote reviews on American writers, mostly fiction writers but also some poets, for major Dutch newspapers; less frequently he discussed American writers for more specialized periodicals, such as *Kroniek van Kunst en Cultuur* and *Criterium*. For the *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant* he reviewed volumes of poetry by Edna St. Vincent Millay (1935) and Edgar Lee Masters (1936), fiction by James T. Farrell (1938), and a critical biography of Dickinson (1939); in the late 1940s he wrote for *Het Parool* on William Faulkner's *Sanctuary*, on the Dutch translation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, on Max Eastman's autobiography, *The Enjoyment of Living*, and on "The Influence of American Writers on the Flemish Novel" (on Piet van Aken). For *Algemeen Handelsblad* he discussed "The Novel Abroad," Norman Mailer, Henry Miller, and (on the occasion of the film version) Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* (1950). For the *Kroniek van Kunst en Cultuur* he wrote about Nathaniel Hawthorne (1945-1946), and for *Criterium* a long essay on Faulkner (1948).¹

¹ For bibliographical information on Vestdijk, see Jean Brüll, *Vestdijk op krantenpapier* (Utrecht, 1984) and Brüll's multi-volume *Overzicht van de bijdragen van en over S. Vestdijk in letterkundige- en algemeen kulturele tijdschriften uit de jaren 1930-1972* (Utrecht, 1977-).

An omnivorous reader as well as a prolific writer (he was said to write faster than God could read), Vestdijk was clearly well-read in American literature; his range of reference in his essays and reviews was remarkably wide, often going far beyond the immediate subject matter. Besides the authors listed above, Vestdijk had read Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, Henry James, Theodore Dreiser, Upton Sinclair, Vachel Lindsay, Carl Sandburg, John Steinbeck, Erskine Caldwell, John Dos Passos, Margaret Mitchell, Ernest Hemingway, Richard Wright, Edmund Wilson, and Malcolm Cowley.

In writing on American literature, Vestdijk was seldom concerned only with identifying or defining a specific national cultural characteristic or distilling an "American" literary essence. Foremost, as I aim to show, he would seek to appropriate individual American writers because they illuminated general characteristics of literature which could be accommodated to his personal concerns or poetics. In "The Enchantment of the Past" he discussed Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, for example, within the context of his own preoccupation with the historical novel, while he read Robinson's poem "Luke Havergal" as an unparalleled synthesis of poetry and mystical philosophy.²

Only rarely did he criticize American culture and its effects on American literature. In his review of Farrell's *A World I Never Made*, for instance, Vestdijk observed that "social 'tendenz' seems inevitable, especially when one considers that in America every realism, even with the 'scientific' Dreiser, tends to pass into indictment, because a society which is so dynamic, so much in the making as American society carries trends and tendencies within itself: all the writer has to do is to register and record for him to become, even without preconceived bitterness, a voice crying in the wilderness."³

When Vestdijk commented on American culture more directly, he did so seldom without a touch of irony, but his observations hardly rose above the stereotypical charges of the absence of a cultural tradition, excessive materialism, and moral insensitivity. Thus he observed that, in Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*, "the typically American" was not wanting: "regret at business reverses, money worries, political aspirations"

² "De betovering van het verleden," *Kroniek van Kunst en Cultuur*, 7.5 (1945-1946): 135-37; rpt. in *Essays in duodecimo* (Amsterdam, 1952), 38-43. "Bij een gedicht van E.A. Robinson," *Forum*, 3.9 (1934): 802-20; rpt. in *Lier en lancet* (Amsterdam, 1939, 1976), 52-71.

³ "Jerse show," *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant*, October 15, 1938; rpt. in *Muiterij tegen het etmaal* (The Hague, 1942, 1947, 1966), I, 210-14. None of Vestdijk's critical writings have appeared in, or have been translated into, English; I have translated Vestdijk's finely shaded prose to the best of my ability.

were things which lent "an unmistakable accent" to the characters' lives.⁴ The review of *The Great Gatsby* is another case in point. Vestdijk judged the novel "a classical contribution to the literature which centered on a theme recurrent in the European novel since Byron, that of the brilliant and individualistic young hero destroyed by social restrictions," yet found that Fitzgerald's "American edition" of the theme had "its own special character, one partially determined by social circumstances." Despite Poe and Melville, Vestdijk advanced, "Byronism had never quite established itself in America" as it had in Europe, where the spirit of the Middle Ages was still palpable and "Romanticism was once a historical reality." In Vestdijk's reading, *Gatsby* was partially destroyed because he failed "to connect with the ancient culture from which the U.S.A. had once sprung." With subtle condescension Vestdijk commented that "reckless driving" seemed "a vice more or less symbolic" for America, while the value attached to "throwing about one's money" also appeared "very American." Likewise, "extremely typical" for "the spirit of the country" was "the superior indifference, obliviousness almost," with which Daisy Buchanan and *Gatsby's* friends and associates in the end turned away from *Gatsby*.⁵ In a similar vein Vestdijk took Warren's *All the King's Men* as illustrative of "the influence of women" on a man's public and personal life, which he thought "typical of America and not the sign of a lack of civilization."⁶ Finally, Eastman's autobiography, which in Vestdijk's view reflected a characteristically American "optimistic attitude to life," triggered the observation that, "after all, in the American vitality there is much that is cramped and spasmodic: the broad smile consumes no less muscular energy" than the washing of plates or the prospecting for gold.⁷

The case of Henry Miller was more complex and ambiguous, for here was an author (obviously admired by Vestdijk) whose literary distinctions seemed intimately bound up with his very Americanness. After Faulkner, Miller was the American writer of fiction with the strongest and most personal, if not unambivalent, appeal to Vestdijk. Vestdijk proclaimed Miller a "genius," "one of the greatest writers of his time." Attributing to Miller an "incurable and naive erotomania," Vestdijk not only found Miller's often-criticized obscenity presented with a humor that indicated a deep and realistic insight into human nature, but he also saw in it "a sharp

⁴ Review of Edgar Lee Masters, *De dooden van Spoon River*, *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant*, October 24, 1936, evening ed., 2E.

⁵ "'De Grote Gatsby' van Scott Fitzgerald: Een literair zelfportrait," *Het Parool*, September 25, 1948, 7.

⁶ "Geschiedenis van een 'dictator': Despotisme als uitlaatklep der democratie," *Algemeen Handelsblad*, December 30, 1950, 10.

⁷ "'Het verrukkelijke leven': Autobiografie van Max Eastman," *Het Parool*, July 23, 1949, 7.

instinct for the natural in a world which too often accepts the sexual as 'natural' only in theory." Moreover, Miller's treatment of the perverse was marked by "a sheer moralistic accent which betrays the author's American descent." Miller, Vestdijk observed, was "above all an American with an unhappy love for his country," whose work carried the unmistakable stamp of his native culture:

This curious author is American in his lack of discipline, his impudence, his drastic boastings and exaggerations; his urge for the colossal and fantastic in his endless self-revelations; his dilettantism; his sensitivity to influences (Whitman, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Lawrence); his Indian patience in adversity; his nihilism, as a concrete, actively inspiring force; his extremely personal mysticism ... and finally, in his idiosyncratic fusion of the quixotic and the soberly functional, which is nowhere found in such abundance as in the country where stone-hard businessmen can be genuine idealists.⁸

Generally, however, Vestdijk's frame of reference was supranational, his point of comparison the literature of the Western world. Vestdijk thus implicitly acknowledged that by the late 1940s, with the rise of the United States to world power, American literature in European (or at least in Dutch) eyes had outgrown its earlier parochialism. A two-part essay on "The Novel Abroad," which Vestdijk wrote for *Algemeen Handelsblad* in the early spring of 1950, proves that, from a Dutch perspective, American writers had come to take up a prominent position in the international literary scene. In Vestdijk's appraisal the influence of American writers emerged as on a par with (and in certain respects stronger than) that of British, French, or German writers. Among the general tendencies marking international postwar literature Vestdijk diagnosed "a pessimism which has come to replace the (relative) optimism of the 1920s, a disillusioned skepticism after an earlier idealism, functionalism and immediacy after an often fantastic urge to experiment, ... and a reverting to tradition after the fresh progressivism of the avant-gardes." Insofar as one could also speak of "a mounting interest in the social," it was, Vestdijk felt, mostly a forced interest which lacked the "spontaneity" of "older protesting figures like Zola, Sinclair, or Dreiser." Overriding all modern tendencies was an emphasis on "the direct experience ... the direct psychology, without explanation or addition, possibly in confessional form – the direct, naked reality, sometimes written in stylistically crude and imperfect form." Among the interbellum writers who could be said to "prefigure" these postwar tendencies, American writers loomed prominently: Vestdijk placed Hemingway, Faulkner, and Miller side by side with Franz Kafka, James

⁸ "Henry Miller: Onkruid dat niet vergaan zal," *Algemeen Handelsblad*, July 15, 1950, 5. For Vestdijk on Miller, see also "Illustratieve essaykunst van Pierre H. Dubois: Bepaalde visie op Henry Miller," *Algemeen Handelsblad*, April 28, 1951, 11.

Joyce, and D.H. Lawrence. Where Hemingway's influence was limited to "functionalism" and "immediacy," however, Miller emerged as the "pre-figuring writer par excellence" and, again, elicited Vestdijk's strong enthusiasm: despite his "despairingly nihilistic worldview," Miller had "a verve, an irony, a humor so exuberant and expansive" that he deserved to be ranked with Rabelais: it was, Vestdijk felt, "the explosion of a temperament unparalleled in his country after *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville. Yet in his own country he has been banned."⁹

Among important postwar writers, Vestdijk again singled out a large contingent of American authors: Steinbeck, Caldwell, Wright, Farrell, Wilson, Mailer, Miller, Hemingway, and Dos Passos. He also pointed to the revival of interest in Melville and James (though he would like to see the "longwinded" James replaced by Marcel Proust as a source of inspiration for contemporary authors). Towering above all, however, was William Faulkner, "subtle and atrabilious psychologist, and obsessed epic writer, who later will likely be named in the same breath with Balzac." Curiously it was not Hemingway but Faulkner who was the "master" of the "literature of 'understatements'" – to Vestdijk the most characteristic feature of postwar literary production: "the concealment of the emotion itself in order to convey its tensions to the reader more effectively." It was a tendency particularly noticeable in the American social novel, most impressively in Richard Wright's *Native Son*: "The Upton Sinclairs presented grandiose frescoes of mass suffering, but the modern writer and reader demand a greater immediacy, the rendering of personal suffering, its roots, the subtle nuances which separate it from happiness – and also the surmounting of this suffering, not with the help of utopian systems, but here and now." If existentialism, both as philosophy and as literature, struck Vestdijk as "a triumph of the 'understatement,'" American writers were among its most impressive and influential proponents.¹⁰

Held together by the distinctive voice and vision of the critic, Vestdijk's more substantial reviews of American fiction inevitably reflect his own literary concerns and preoccupations and are often as revealing about Vestdijk as they are about the writers he reviewed. Several of Vestdijk's reviews show his predilection for the kind of psychologically astute fiction he himself wrote. Referring to *The Scarlet Letter* as "that psychological masterpiece of American literature," Vestdijk argued, for instance, that in Hawthorne the psychologist and the poet were at least as strong as the

⁹ "De roman in het buitenland: Na-oorlogse literatuur en haar voorlopers," *Algemeen Handelsblad*, March 25, 1950, 5.

¹⁰ "De roman in het buitenland: Literatuur der 'understatements,'" *Algemeen Handelsblad*, April 1, 1950, 5.

historical novelist.¹¹ Similarly, though "one of the most functional and soberest social tableaux in world literature," Farrell's *A World I Never Made* was foremost "a psychological novel," "a masterly study of Irish 'hysteria.'"¹² Even *The Great Gatsby* seemed to Vestdijk less a chronicle of the Jazz Age than "a literary self-portrait" of Fitzgerald, a projection of the author's "inner contradictions" onto the figure of Jay Gatsby, "at the expense of psychological plausibility."¹³ Likewise, Vestdijk rated Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* a novel of "genius" because of its "surplus" of "psychological insight, evocation of human existences, humor, and bitterness."¹⁴ In his discussion of the Flemish writer Piet van Aken, Vestdijk saw "The Influence of American Writers on the Flemish Novel" manifesting itself in two opposed, but not necessarily irreconcilable directions: the "vertical" psychological influence of Faulkner and the "horizontal" influence of the "hard," new "functionalism" of Hemingway, Steinbeck, and Dos Passos. Although the latter group of authors represented the optimistic urge to "epically rediscover the world" – an urge Vestdijk saw as typically American and conspicuously absent from Dutch, if not from Flemish writing – Vestdijk's own preference was unmistakably for the "vertical" Faulknerian influence.¹⁵

Vestdijk's predilection for the psychological over the social or historical is most clearly evident in his most substantial review essay on American fiction, a long consideration of *The Portable Faulkner*, an anthological compilation of Faulkner's work edited by Malcolm Cowley. With the *Portable*, Cowley aimed to make visible the unity of Faulkner's work by pointing up the interconnecting Yoknapatawpha saga and arguing that Faulkner's novels together constituted "a tragic fable of Southern history," in which characters who were complex living creations could also be read as "emblematic" of a "social situation."¹⁶ The *Portable* helped to bring Faulkner's reputation, in the United States and abroad, in line with his achievement, thus paving the way for the award of the Nobel Prize to Faulkner. In a review of *Sanctuary* for *Het Parool*, however, Vestdijk had already dismissed Cowley's *Portable* as a "shrewd hodge-podge" and denounced the "childlikeness" of the enterprise: "Whoever carries Cowley's

¹¹ "De betovering van het verleden," *Essays in duodecimo*, 41-42.

¹² "Terse show," *Muiterij tegen het etmaal*, I, 211, 212.

¹³ "'De Grote Gatsby' van Scott Fitzgerald," *Het Parool*, September 25, 1948, 7.

¹⁴ "Apotheose van dierlijke trouw," *Algemeen Handelsblad*, January 28, 1950, 9; rpt. in *Zuiverende kroniek: Essays* (Amsterdam, 1956), 109-11.

¹⁵ "Piet van Aken, *Alleen de dooden ontkomen*: Invloed van Amerikaanse schrijvers op Vlaamse romankunst," *Het Parool*, July 3, 1948, 7.

¹⁶ Malcolm Cowley, "Introduction," *The Portable Faulkner* (New York, 1946), rpt., with an afterword, in Cowley's *A Second Flowering: Works and Days of the Lost Generation* (New York, 1973), 130-55.

recreation with him is like Atlas shouldering the globe, in the uncomfortable awareness that one is making things ten times too easy for oneself." Vestdijk's principal objection to Cowley's compilation was that it reduced Faulkner to "a historical novelist, a modern Walter Scott." Rather, Vestdijk argued, in Faulkner's best works the individual took precedence over the collective: "the personal adventure, the specific humanity, the irreplaceable detail prevail over the general framework in which they are placed." According to Vestdijk, Faulkner's oeuvre was marked by "an astonishing but undeniably subjective sense for dramatic-psychological conflict. ... Faulkner is one of those writers who draw on themselves rather than design 'portraits'; and his heroes, no matter how individualized they are, are ever connected by invisible threads to Faulkner himself."¹⁷

In his longer essay on Faulkner for *Criterium*¹⁸ Vestdijk probed more deeply, again giving Cowley short shrift, but in the process revealing the bias underlying his own reading of Faulkner. He opened his review by affirming the scandalous neglect of Faulkner – "In Holland we are still thirsting for novels by William Faulkner" – and lashing out against "'The Book-of-the-Month'-clubs and such typically female-monthly phenomena" responsible for commercializing an American literary market. Giving Cowley niggardly credit for having written an introduction to Faulkner "worth reading" and for being "a Faulkner-supporter of the right kind," he went on to observe that he "hardly ever" agreed with his American coeval, because Cowley "reads Faulkner differently than I do." "With the force of mockery," Vestdijk rejected Cowley's suggestion that Faulkner might have profited as a stylist by serving an apprenticeship to Hemingway: if sometimes Faulkner's style was "unpalatable" through its "many abstracta" and its "more than labyrinthine sentence structure," at its best his "obstinate, uncompromising, highly inspired style is so thoroughly a part of himself that its disadvantages cannot be dissociated from its advantages." The style was wholly justified in a novel like *Pylon*, which to Vestdijk was Faulkner's artistic "masterpiece," but which Cowley, as Vestdijk noted, had excluded from the anthology.¹⁹

More seriously, Vestdijk took issue with Cowley's contention that Faulkner "excels in the long story rather than the novel," as a result of which "too little from precisely the best novels" appeared in the *Portable*. Vestdijk attributed this to "the exaggerated importance [Cowley] attaches to a

¹⁷ "William Faulkner, Amerikaans schrijver van de Zuidelijke Staten," *Het Parool*, March 13, 1948, 7.

¹⁸ "Erotische driehoeksmeting," *Criterium*, 6.5 (1948): 304-11; rpt. in *Zuiverende kroniek*, 100-08. The quotations in the text are from the reprinted version.

¹⁹ Vestdijk apparently failed to see that Cowley had excluded *Pylon* because it fell outside the scope of the Yoknapatawpha saga.

historical-social interpretation of Faulkner's oeuvre," his inclination to see "social symbols" and "legends" of the South, a "collective structure" rather than "an imaginative reconstruction of individual lives." Although he granted, half-grudgingly, that it *was* possible to read Faulkner's oeuvre as a "chronicle" of the South, even that this might well be the necessary point of departure "in a *Portable* which must win over America (and possibly Sweden) for Faulkner," Vestdijk objected that such a "vision" was borne out at best by some of the novellas, but to a much lesser degree, or not at all, by the novels.²⁰ His most serious objection to Cowley's presentation was that it evinced a "one-sidedness through which a psychologically more commanding Faulkner is withheld from us." Given a choice, Cowley "infallibly" subordinated the psychological to the social, the "better" to the "worse" ("I do not see how anyone can prefer the massive and monotonous Mississippi-story 'Old Man' to the absorbing abortion-story 'The Wild Palms' ... An abortion is admittedly more compromising than a river"). Vestdijk found it impossible to read a John Sartoris (*The Unvanquished*) as merely a "social symbol" or "representative" of his clan, or to see in Popeye (*Sanctuary*), as Cowley would have it, a representative of "the mechanical civilization that invaded and conquered the South ... a compendium of all the hateful qualities that Faulkner assign[ed] to finance capitalism,"²¹ rather than "an extremely suggestive rendering" of a timeless psychological type, the degenerated criminal, the physically deficient seeking overcompensation. In Vestdijk's view, Cowley's "symbolic" approach could only lead to a "superficial" and "schematic" mode of reading.

Vestdijk did not so much intend to posit the individual-psychological over against the social-historical as to demonstrate that both originated in the same subjective source: the impressions and family stories of Faulkner's youth. In Faulkner's work, Vestdijk argued, the tension between the individual and the collective could best be studied where the collective unit was smallest: the triangle. The third member was essential to lift the tensions and conflicts beyond those of an "égoïsme à deux." "The triangle is not only the germ of every social ordering (father-mother-child), but also the explosive that threatens this ordering time and again, the dynamic factor in the emotional life, and thus in every novel that leans so strongly on the tortured play of emotions as is the case with Faulkner" (or, one might add, with Vestdijk). Faulkner's map of Yoknapatawpha, drawn especially for the

²⁰ Vestdijk's critique is weakened by his apparently having read only six of Faulkner's novels: *Sanctuary*, *The Wild Palms*, *Light in August*, *The Unvanquished*, *Soldier's Pay*, and *Pylon*. His review suggests that he had not read *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, two of the Yoknapatawpha novels. Cowley's interpretation of Faulkner, on the other hand, was based on all seventeen works Faulkner had published by 1945.

²¹ Cowley, *A Second Flowering*, 146.

Portable, was "much less typical for his art than the erotic trigonometry with the aid of which so much subtler territory is being mapped." For Vestdijk, then, the focal point of Faulkner's work, "the most typical of his art and psychology," was not a social or historical myth or legend, but the theme of incest.²² "Legend, myth, symbolism: these are there galore in Faulkner, but they are to be situated historically in ancient Greece [source of the Oedipus myth] rather than in the Deep South." As Vestdijk argued, "History by itself, a civil war, a social upheaval, are never mythmaking – something supra-temporal needs to be added, deeply rooted in the instinctual life and rising from it to the sphere of the ideal and the universal."

In seeking to correct Cowley's social-historical emphasis, Vestdijk may well have strained too obsessively in the opposite direction. In the remainder of his review Vestdijk, not surprisingly, found in Faulkner what he wanted to find: a plethora of triangular situations, in a kaleidoscopic variety, from the Oedipal to the incestuous to the perverse. Whereas Cowley read the "sexual nightmares" in, for instance, *Sanctuary* as "in reality social symbols,"²³ Vestdijk argued that Faulkner's fiction offered us an "idiosyncratic psychic structure" as a "microscopic image of the social." Particularly in the triangle, "the individual passes into the collective, there being only artificial boundaries between the two. Here one finds the concrete human relation as the palpable foundation of a sense of community." Faulkner, Vestdijk concluded, "remains attached to his erotic trigonometry, even while he seems to traverse 'Yoknapatawpha County' in the present and in the past with social-historical seven-league boots."

If Vestdijk may be faulted for self-servingly reducing the complexity and subtlety of Cowley's presentation of Faulkner, his critique was not wholly unwarranted. Although by 1946, the year the *Portable* was published, Cowley had shed his radical politics and in his literary criticism had turned from an emphasis on the shaping force of social and historical reality to a reappreciation of the tragic dimensions of the inner life, his writings retained the marks of his 1930s social and historical consciousness; indisputably, Cowley was more naturally inclined to read Faulkner from a social-historical perspective than from a psychological one. Conversely, Vestdijk may well have found in Faulkner's novels a reflection of his own preoccupations.²⁴ Vestdijk's preference for *Pylon* as Faulkner's masterpiece is, to say the least,

²² Cowley, by contrast, spoke of "the secondary theme of incest and miscegenation." *A Second Flowering*, 148.

²³ Cowley, *A Second Flowering*, 146.

²⁴ The triangular relationship had a peculiar and obsessive fascination for Vestdijk, an "erotic trigonometry" governing his personal life in the years after 1945, when he lived with Ans Koster, while conducting an affair with Henriëtte van Eyk. See Hans Visser, *Simon Vestdijk, een schrijversleven* (Utrecht, 1987), 336-40, and *passim*.

eccentric. In Cowley's defense it might be pointed out that his diagnosis of a Yoknapatawpha saga as the interconnecting element in Faulkner's work was borne out by eight of the nine novels Faulkner published *after* the *Portable*. By 1973, however, even Cowley had to acknowledge that his 1945 introduction might need a change of emphasis, not so much to accommodate a psychological dimension (this had been less conspicuously absent from his essay than Vestdijk made it appear in his 1948 review), as to make clear that Faulkner was less concerned with creating a legend of the South than with illuminating a universal and timeless human situation.²⁵ In the end, both Cowley's reading and Vestdijk's are legitimate; rather than being mutually exclusive they seem to be surprisingly complementary.

Vestdijk's two most substantial essays on American poetry, on Emily Dickinson (1932) and Edwin Arlington Robinson (1933), were crucial for the development of his critical and poetic aesthetics.²⁶ Showing Vestdijk's intensely subjective engagement with the two poets, they illustrated Vestdijk's sensitivity to both the formal aspects and the enchanting power of poetry – a duality also apparent from the title of the volume in which they were collected: *Lier en lancet* (Lyre and Lancet; 1939). At the same time, they moved beyond a personal testimony to make a theoretical statement about poetry in general.

Vestdijk's admiration for Robinson was more strictly circumscribed than his near-adulation of Dickinson. In "On a Poem by E.A. Robinson" Vestdijk gave a brilliant reading of Robinson's poem "Luke Havergal," which he considered to be "one of the most precious and engaging syntheses of poetry

²⁵ Cowley, *A Second Flowering*, 154-55.

²⁶ Vestdijk also reviewed the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay and Edgar Lee Masters, but measured against Dickinson and Robinson, these two poets did not command more than a passing interest. Of the two, Millay elicited Vestdijk's greater sympathy, perhaps because her poetry, at least superficially, showed an affinity with Dickinson's. According to Vestdijk, Millay's "strongest points" – her "critical sense, irony, and curiously wry and secret necrophilia" – could not cover up the "lack of a truly great vision." Nor could they entirely take away the impression of a "fashionable laconism," though her faults were redeemed by a "dry, functional, and pointed plasticity" – a quality Vestdijk found more richly and effectively in Dickinson. Review of Millay, *Wine from These Grapes*, in *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant*, January 3, 1935, evening ed., 2D. Masters struck Vestdijk as an "epigone" of Whitman, but one whose verse was "distinctly static" in nature. Like Robinson, Lindsay, and Sandburg, Masters "received the influence of Poe and Whitman by way of French or English intermediaries," thus proving "the lack of understanding which a young culture like the American displays for its great men." Despite their fame, however, these poets did not belong to the "great" ones: "it was only with the passport of symbolism and *vers libre* in their pockets that they took their chance, while their Imagist successors, the truly 'modernist' school in America, were even less great and hardly American anymore. It veritably seems," Vestdijk concluded, "as if for at least a century all poets will pale to *poetae minores* before the triple constellation of Poe, Whitman, and Dickinson." Review of Masters, *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant*, October 24, 1936, evening ed., 2E.

and mystical philosophy we have." As this phrase suggests, Vestdijk seemed less interested in the specific qualities of Robinson's art than in "Luke Havergal" as illustrating a particular kind of poetic synthesis. Vestdijk's essay, accordingly, took the poem mostly as a pretext for examining a theoretical problem: the question of the (im)possibility of objectivity in artistic judgment (most often a "delicate balance between 'subjective' and 'objective'"), the *belief* (which Vestdijk argued could never be more than a belief) in the existence of poetic excellence as an autonomous, objectively verifiable quality.²⁷

A cornerstone essay in his own poetics, "On the Poet Emily Dickinson" was one of Vestdijk's finest and most lucid essays, and one of the most sensitive and articulate appreciations of the specific qualities of Dickinson's art – in any language. For these reasons it is here dealt with most extensively and last, even though it was written shortly before the Robinson essay and long before the reviews on American fiction discussed above. Vestdijk's essay on Dickinson was published in two lengthy instalments in *Forum*, a Dutch literary periodical, edited by two leading Dutch essayists, Menno ter Braak and Edgar du Perron.²⁸ The essay served to introduce Dickinson to Dutch readers, who were generally unfamiliar with her poetry (both Ter Braak and Du Perron confessed they first made her acquaintance through Vestdijk's essay). At the same time it was a brilliant apologia for a neglected American poet, a plea for the recognition of Dickinson's essential "modernity," and an implicit manifesto for a personal poetics.²⁹ As E.M. Beekman has observed, the essay was "not only the germ for the full flowering of [Vestdijk's] later poetics, but also a grammar of his main concerns."³⁰ In embryonic form the Dickinson essay expressed ideas that Vestdijk was to elaborate and refine in the two books that contained the fullest articulation of his critical thought, *Albert Verwey en de idee* (1940) en *De glanzende kiemcel* (1950).

In the opening section of his essay Vestdijk probed into the reasons for Dickinson's relative obscurity. Of American poets, he argued, the Dutch "outsider" was familiar with "the beard of Walt Whitman" and "the somber

²⁷ "Bij een gedicht van E.A. Robinson," *Lier en lancet*, 52-71.

²⁸ "Over de dichteres Emily Dickinson," *Forum*, 2.5 (1933): 346-66; and *Forum*, 2.6 (1933): 432-52. The essay was reprinted integrally in *Lier en lancet*, 9-51. The quotations in the text have been taken from the reprinted version.

²⁹ For the place of the essay on Dickinson in the development of Vestdijk's poetics and the reception of his essay by the Dutch literary and critical community, I am indebted to Harry Bekkering, *Veroverde traditie: De poëtische opvattingen van S. Vestdijk* (Amsterdam, 1989). Bekkering also discusses Vestdijk's essay on Robinson in detail.

³⁰ E.M. Beekman, "Gentleman of Sadness: Simon Vestdijk as Poet," *Vestdijkkroniek*, 13 (1976): 2. Beekman's essay is the fullest treatment in English of Vestdijk's poetic theory and practice.

mask" of Edgar Allan Poe: he knew both poets, whose work was available in Dutch translation, "as if they were Europeans, even fellow countrymen." But unless he made his own explorations, the Dutch reader had no way of discovering that Dickinson deserved "a place among the great originals of world literature." Superficially regarded, her poetry might have been neglected so long because it was published too late (in 1890) to effectively counter or compete with the influence of Whitman and Poe. Having been reclaimed for American and world literature by European, especially French, writers and critics, Whitman and Poe had become so strongly representative of "the two hemispheres of the poetic universe" – the dynamic and the static, the realist and the fantasist, the dithyrambic and the introspective pessimist – that no room was left for a third major poetic strand. But a deeper reason for Dickinson's neglect was, according to Vestdijk, that she belonged to a type of artist that seemed predestined to remain obscure – a type characterized by "a certain inaccessibility and hardness, ... an asceticism that is difficult to define, a recalcitrance which manifests itself most clearly in a total lack of accommodation to the public taste." These presumably "negative" features were, however, amply compensated for by "the artlessness and originality through which time and again the highest or most essential in art is approximated" (Vestdijk spoke of a mode of "spiritualization" or "internalization").

As Dutch scholars have noted, Vestdijk's characterization of such type-inherent reasons for obscurity not only echoed the objections later critics made against his own poetry, but also reflected his own development and calling as a poet.³¹ Part of Vestdijk's purpose in writing the essay on Dickinson may well have been to create a critical ambience favorable for the reception of his own poetry – his first book of poems, *Verzen*, appeared in 1932, the year in which the Dickinson essay was written – and the essay might be read as both an astute definition of Dickinson's art and self-serving poetic propaganda.

In order to buttress his defense of a specific kind of poetry, Vestdijk argued that Whitman and Poe could be estimated at their proper value shortly after their deaths because they managed to perfect certain external poetic qualities which could be readily appreciated by the mass of readers: both appealed to "our mediocre instincts," the average schoolboy being sensitive to a poem such as Poe's "The Raven," the average democratic idealist to the perorations of Whitman. Those external qualities were mostly those of sound, "the most palpable exponent of generally recognized 'good' poetry"; "a perfect sound-poem ... with an empty content will more readily be accepted as poetry than the strongest poetic impulse as yet not formed

³¹ See Bekkering, *Veroverde traditie*, 62-63.

into a striking entity of sound." Both Poe and Whitman exemplified two varieties of this *sound-type* of poetry, the musical and the verbal: the former through his "narcotic melodiousness" and his "mathematical elaborateness," the latter through his "unbridled auction-style" and his "prophetic bellowing voice." Between these two, Dickinson's poetry, less conspicuous in sound, was bound to shrivel to the category of "minor" poetry: "sung down" by Poe, Dickinson was "shouted down" by Whitman.

By contrast Vestdijk posited Dickinson as a representative of the *intentional type* of poetry. This type of poetry was "destined to flourish in concealment through its greater simplicity and sobriety," in which "the poetic impulse" remained "naked and unprotected" and in which form, technique, and syntactical differentiation were subordinate to "originality of vision and conception." This was not to argue, Vestdijk carefully pointed out, that "form" was subordinate to "content" – both could not be separated, but at most differentiated; the poetic intention, after all, was "no less pregnant of the form than of the content it carries within it," while both "form and content develop[ed] simultaneously from the poetic intention."

Vestdijk did not mean to condone the apparent formlessness of Dickinson's poetry (that is, when measured by the traditional classicist rules of the *ars poetica*), but rather to argue *against* an overestimation of sound as an absolute value in poetry, and *for* a recognition of at least the equal worth of the intentional type of poetry. Only the pedantic schoolmaster, he said, would find fault with Dickinson's manifold sins against the "art of poetry." Appearances deceived: her poetry might seem to have moved beyond "a harmonious balance between essence and form, content and wording, intention and realization," but there was "no poetry which *seems* so little, yet *is* so much." After all, "the poetic intention, provided it is sufficiently concentrated, *is* poetry, or, rather, is the essence of poetry, is the only thing that gives meaning to poetry." For Dickinson the "naked, unadorned form" was the only possible mode of expression: any regulated verse form or disciplinary prosody would have been exploded by "such a spontaneity, such a high-tensed and self-willed poetic potential." In order to appreciate Dickinson we must forget "sanctioned poetic truths" and surrender to her poems "without preconceptions" – only then shall we find that with her "the intention has almost become the realization, which must as it were be caught in flight."

In analyzing Dickinson's poetry, Vestdijk defined a crucial feature of her modernity:

In Emily Dickinson's art we possess no perfectly (or, rather, completely) crystallized poems, but it is as if we are spying upon an artist engaged in the living process of crystallization; we enter not a museum but a studio; we do not look through watch-tower binoculars at magnificent, quietly rolling landscapes, but through a

microscope at cells *in the process* of splitting, chemical compounds *in the process* of combining and transforming.

Later in the essay Vestdijk observed that we should compare her poems not to etchings, but to "crystals in the process of formation and fixed at the most unexpected moments."³²

In the second section of his eight-part essay Vestdijk probed further into the question of Dickinson's modernity. Whereas earlier he had called her "a 'modern' *avant la lettre*, modern in the sense of what still seems vital to us," now it became clear that "modernity" for Vestdijk signalled a complex constellation of stylistic and attitudinal aspects, of form and vision. Speaking of "an art which reaches its objective with a minimum of objectively demonstrable means," he defined the modernity of Dickinson's poetry as follows:

If one strips modern poetry of all its accidentals, of its forced capriciousness of style, of "isms" and excrescences, one retains a striving for immediacy, for what is at once intensive and spontaneous, but also for reduction to the essential, for sharpening concentration, for laconic functionalism [in Dutch: *zakelijkheid*] concomitant with the most luxurious fantasy. ... One could speak of a primitivism which is simultaneously the highest form of sophistication: a *regained simplicity* which includes all possibilities of complication because it has passed beyond all complications.

This for Vestdijk, then, was Dickinson's accomplishment: the attainment of "the utmost simplicity of form and language, apparently verging upon unpretentious stammering, and yet through content, plasticity, tone, and precision incontestably art."

On the one hand, Dickinson's poetry exemplified the stylistic and technical features of modernity: Vestdijk singled out her use of assonance and consonance; her half-rhymes (rhyme "*in statu nascendi*," "a first groping for rhyme"); her concise and elliptically distorted syntax, sometimes cryptic and awkward, but always aimed at a lucid and logical expression of the central thought; her allusiveness and suggestiveness ("the use of sidelights"); her versatility of tone; her aphoristic concentration; the concreteness of her verse even when most philosophical or abstract (her poetry was "the ultimate concretization of the abstract"). On the other hand, Dickinson's

³² Interestingly, Vestdijk's concern with form and content parallels the views articulated somewhat earlier by American critics such as Allen Tate, Kenneth Burke, and Malcolm Cowley, while his modernist perception of poetry as process rather than finished product echoes similar observations by Paul Valéry in *Variété* (1924). See for this aspect of Burke, Cowley, and Tate, Hans Bak, *Malcolm Cowley: The Formative Years* (Athens, Ga., 1993), *passim*, and Burke and Cowley's discussions of "form" and "matter" in Paul Jay, ed., *The Selected Correspondence of Kenneth Burke and Malcolm Cowley, 1915-1981* (New York, 1988). For Valéry, see, for instance, his "Introduction to the Method of Leonardo da Vinci," in *Variety* (New York, 1927), 224-83, *passim*.

modernity spoke for Vestdijk from her laconic "unconstraint" in dealing with the profoundest subjects: she managed to avoid rigidity and rationalization, retained playfulness, lucidity, and penetration, as well as open-mindedness and impartiality. "Areas which belong to the ideal superstructure of human thought – religion, metaphysics, psychology – are taken up in the same sort of poems, with the same sort of tone, as in the simplest nature-lyrics." Unlike the surrealist or rationalist, Dickinson "surrenders to the living motions of the psyche with unconcern, nothing is too low or too high to become the occasion for her poetry. In germ, these poems contain *everything*, because they appear to have caught the psychic stream as closely as possible to its source, before any branching or canalization could begin." Dickinson combined "the maximum of conciseness" with the "maximum of universality, not the expansive universality of Whitman but the suggestive universality of a microcosm."

I have lingered so long with these opening sections of the essay because they contain the substance of Vestdijk's argument. In the remaining sections of the essay Vestdijk went on to demonstrate the modernity of Dickinson's poetry – both in form and vision – as exemplified in her "plastic" gift (section III), her nature poetry (IV), her poetry of ideas (V), her psychological poetry (VI), and her love poetry (VII). In the process, he showed himself a masterly close reader, of exquisite intelligence and refined sensibility. Throughout he praised her gift for "plasticity" and "concentration" – two keywords in Vestdijk's conception of modernity – her avoidance of sentimentality, her cool wit and irony, her power of aesthetic transformation, her independence from traditional values, her "delicious dryness," her "*zakelijkheid*," and "*Realphantastik*." He took her nature poetry as a modern specimen of the "pseudo-lyricism" also found in Rilke, singling out her "imaginative power," her sensuous imagery, her playfulness and exuberant fantasy, her refusal to acknowledge a difference between the objects of nature and the objects of the mind. In her hands a six-line poem could become a substitute for "a treatise on Kantian philosophy."

In the poems which gave expression to her intellectual life, Vestdijk pointedly signalled Dickinson's original way of transforming the intellectual heritage of Puritanism and Emersonian Transcendentalism. He was impressed by her independence of mind, exemplified in her wry and rebellious criticism of religious values and powers and in her indecisive skepticism: it seemed, Vestdijk observed, as if "she believes, yet continues to posit over against this belief her own freedom, her own mobility in testing, accepting, and rejecting." Most enjoyable to a modern sensibility he found those poems which were less metaphysical and eschatological than speculative in a more earthy vein and which expressed a "primitive," yet "impartial sense of wonder" at the fundamental manifestations of life. Here Vestdijk

identified two principal themes underlying all of her work: first, a concern with change, transience, and impermanence (as in "Pain – has an Element of Blank"); second, an antithetical habit of mind and a poetic methodology in which polar opposites were obsessively brought together without their attaining synthesis.

In her "psychological" poems, Vestdijk credited Dickinson with "a fine intuition for psychological contemplation." Like Nietzsche, Dickinson gained her insights into human nature mostly through self-analysis, yet was fully aware of "all the dangers of introversion." Both Nietzsche and Dickinson, Vestdijk argued, were deeply concerned with the problem of personal authenticity; in Dickinson's case the problem was embodied in its most essential form in a poem such as "I like a look of Agony."

For Vestdijk Dickinson's art reached its apex in her love poems. "The abyss which separates her from the world and her fellow human beings is bridged, but only through the airy structure of art. Only in her love poetry is the bridge complete, is the abyss, wide and deep, closed, even if only temporarily." In dealing with her love poetry, however, Vestdijk faced a problem of critical methodology. Throughout his essay his emphasis lay rather unremittingly on Dickinson as a poet, on the complex inter-relationship of form and content in her poetry as an index of her modernity and excellence. As the Dutch critic G. Knuvelde put it, "What particularly rouses Vestdijk's interest is the origin of the poem in the psyche of the poet. Not the circumstances of life ... are what fascinate him, but what goes on in the deepest dimensions of the poet's soul; Vestdijk unravels this as if he had been there himself!"³³ Only rarely in the essay did Vestdijk tread outside the frame of the specific poem, shunning (and even trivializing) references to the life and the morbid and sensationalist legend, but insisting on dealing with Dickinson on the basis of her poetic qualities. Only in dealing with the love poetry did Vestdijk seek a tentative connection between the poetry and the personality, and even then with circumspection and reluctance, and not so much to illuminate her poetry as to refute a fallacious critical approach and redress the misperception of Dickinson as "the nun of Amherst."

Vestdijk's attitude was ambiguous, however. On the one hand, he appeared to share the then still current belief that a severe disappointment in love suffered in early youth explained the flowering of Dickinson's poetry (in this respect Vestdijk's essay is now rather dated; in 1932 there was no reliable biography of Dickinson). On the other hand, he seemed eager to deny the relevance of such knowledge to an appreciation of her artistry. Although he acknowledged that in all probability Dickinson "never ex-

³³ G. Knuvelde, review of *Lier en lancet*, *De Maasbode*, November 4, 1939; quoted in Bekkering, *Veroverde traditie*, 77.

perienced so-called real love," Vestdijk rejected the idea that the "nun of Amherst," as psychoanalytic critics like Régis Michaud would have it, wrote poetry out of souring rancor or frustrated love.³⁴ According to Vestdijk,

The alchemistic transformation of unsatisfied or distorted desire into art is much too fine and complex a process to be illuminated by an undoubtedly important but necessarily gross and provisional theory like psychoanalysis. The unsatisfied sexual impulse is a motor, a necessary occasion, a *conditio sine qua non* among many other and equally important *conditiones*, but not a Cause or Motive, with which one can exhaust the significance of an artist.

Indeed, Vestdijk argued, some of Dickinson's love poems, even if restrained by Puritanism, displayed such an enthusiasm and earthy passion that they belonged to the finest love poems in world literature. Apparently, he concluded, she did not "repress," deny, or conceal anything; rather, she sublimated everything to such a degree "that she still carries the original 'libido' within her, undiminished and unchanged: a paradoxical fact which will baffle the average 'Seelenauflöser' who believes his positivistic-scholarly outlook entitles him to write on art." Vestdijk supported his argument by analyzing the poem he regarded as the high point in Dickinson's art – "I cannot live with You/It would be Life" – in which all the threads of her poetry came together ("as if all her poems were but a prelude to this one poem"): "rebelliousness and stoical acceptance, laceration and desire, metaphysical alertness and surrender to mystery. All these antithetical forces are brought into balance in a poem which is also technically a masterpiece."

Vestdijk concluded his essay with a coda which once again affirmed his conviction of Dickinson's great, if inadequately recognized, importance "for our time." Yet, he granted, that importance was necessarily limited: "I believe that her art, if ever, can be influential as a ferment only." She was too unique to form the foundation for a school or tendency in poetry: she was "a onetime phenomenon" and hence "only 'modern' in a timeless sense." Vestdijk's closing words seemed prescient enough:

She will still be able to speak to later generations, even if these should look back upon *our* "modernism" as upon a fossil. For more even than that incomparable synthesis of unbridled fantasy and superior logic, more than her maximally concentrated form which makes possible that hazardous combination of refined, sharp vision and utmost profundity, it will be her artlessness and authenticity, the marks of both her work and personality, which will continue to enchant.

³⁴ Vestdijk's objection to the reductivism of psychoanalytic criticism sounded much like similar objections advanced by Tate, Cowley, and Wilson, who in the 1920s had argued the case for Poe's artistry as disconnected from his possible pathological deviations. See Hans Bak, "Malcolm Cowley and Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Controversy of the 1920s," *Horns of Plenty* 2.2 (1989): 18-26, 31-35, and Cowley: *The Formative Years*, 384-91.

Vestdijk's nearly unbounded and deeply personal admiration for Dickinson's genius – in a 1939 review of George F. Whicher's critical biography of Dickinson he called her "an American Sappho," "one of the greatest among the great," ranking her with Dante³⁵ – partly derived from a profound sense of poetic affinity. In Dickinson's art he recognized the product of a kindred poetic sensibility, one with which he could deeply empathize and which yielded the kind of "intentional poetry" Vestdijk himself hoped to write. The terms in which he described his own poetry often echoed his analysis of Dickinson's verse: "My poems are first of all plastic," Vestdijk observed in a letter; "Sound and idea are subordinate to image. Plasticity is the 'soul' of poetry; the 'mind' is the idea, the 'body' is the sound."³⁶ As Du Perron noted, in Dickinson's *ars poetica* Vestdijk recognized and defended his own, his essay being "in essence an apologia for the poetry he himself strove to accomplish." Just as Baudelaire recognized his twin brother in Poe, Du Perron wrote, so Vestdijk must have greeted a sort of "twin sister" in Dickinson.³⁷ The Dutch writer and critic Max Nord also argued that Vestdijk doubtlessly "belongs to the intentional type of poet" as defined in the Dickinson essay. Others, too, have taken Vestdijk's essay as an *oratio pro domo*, a "program" for, and the "best introduction" to, his own poetry.³⁸ Ter Braak was among the first to note the close affinity between Vestdijk and Dickinson: "Both with the American and the Dutch poet one finds a masterly poeticization of abstract concepts, side by side with poems which I would like to call 'intimate visions,' because in them the grand and the strictly personal, bound together in the tenderest irony, are equally represented."³⁹

Vestdijk's special affinity with Dickinson also appears from the fact that he translated more poems by her than by any other foreign poet.⁴⁰ Most of these translations were made in 1931, possibly during or before the writing of the essay, as attempts to appropriate the specific qualities of Dickinson's art. Commenting that Dickinson's poetry was "untranslatable," Vestdijk described his renderings as "exercises" or "parallel-phenomena," in which he engaged in an effort to "approximate the poetic intention, without laying

³⁵ "Een Amerikaanse Sappho," *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant*, May 27, 1939; rpt. in *Muiterij tegen het etmaal*, II, 257-62.

³⁶ Quoted in Bekkering, *Veroverde traditie*, 68.

³⁷ Quoted in Bekkering, *Veroverde traditie*, 75-76.

³⁸ See Bekkering, *Veroverde traditie*, 79.

³⁹ Quoted in Bekkering, *Veroverde traditie*, 74.

⁴⁰ Vestdijk translated sixty-four of Dickinson's poems, of which thirty were published in 1939 as *Gedichten: Emily Dickinson* and collected in Martin Hartkamp, ed., *Verzamelde gedichten* (Amsterdam and The Hague, 1971), I, 445-65; the remaining thirty-four were published posthumously in T. van Deel, G. Middag, and H.T.M. van Vliet, eds., *Nagelaten gedichten* (Amsterdam, 1986), 105-41.

claim to textual fidelity. In order not to spoil the inimitable tightness and concentration of these poems, I have in general followed a stricter rhyme scheme and metrical pattern than the original."⁴¹ On the whole, Vestdijk's translations are inferior to his magistral essay: stilted and stiff, they tend to take the "plasticity" out of Dickinson's art, which loses much of its playfulness and idiosyncrasy in Vestdijk's rendering.⁴² As Ter Braak pointed out, "The translations are further proof of the affinity which speaks from the essay; for it seems to me overly clear that Vestdijk, for all the differences between himself and the 'nun of Amherst' (Vestdijk is too little of a monk, even if he does have ascetic and hermetic inclinations, for this terminology to be appropriate), recognized in this poetess a 'sister'; he translated this 'sister' freely, that is, retaining their kinship in his own style."⁴³

Vestdijk's essay was a remarkably sensitive and astute early appreciation of the modernity of Dickinson's poetry. As many critics have testified, for the Dutch literary community it was a truly pioneering act. Not only did Vestdijk singlehandedly introduce Dickinson to the Netherlands in what remains the finest essay on her poetry in Dutch, but his translations also long remained the only ones available.⁴⁴ Vestdijk's early appreciation of Dickinson is the more remarkable since, in the early 1930s, there was no reliable textual edition of her poetry.⁴⁵

⁴¹ "Toelichting," *Gedichten: Emily Dickinson*. Rpt. in *Verzamelde gedichten*, III, 466-67.

⁴² For a discussion of the quality of Vestdijk's renderings of Dickinson, see P. Versteegen, "Vestdijk en Emily Dickinson," *Vestdijkkroniek* 57 (December 1987): 1-11. Versteegen argues that, contrary to Vestdijk's claim of greater metrical strictness, his renderings in effect are metrically "watered down." He also notes that the necessity for rhyme sometimes forced Vestdijk to depart rather far from the original and that Vestdijk's imperfect command of English occasionally engendered mistranslations.

⁴³ Quoted in Bekkering, *Veroverde traditie*, 74.

⁴⁴ Since 1979 several Dutch translations of Dickinson poems have been published, including Jan Eijkelboom, *Wat blijft komt nooit terug* (Amsterdam, 1979); Elly de Waard, *Westers* (Vianen, 1980); Ellen de Zwart, *Emily Dickinson ... om voor jou te breken* (Amsterdam, 1981); Peter Versteegen and Marko Fondse, *Emily Dickinson: Veel waan is schoonste logica* (Amsterdam, 1983); and Louise van Santen, *Emily Dickinson: Gedichten* (1986). For a comparative discussion of these translations, see Monique van Brandenburg and Paulien Lammers, "Emily Dickinson vertaald" (unpublished senior thesis, Catholic University Nijmegen, 1990). Peter Versteegen also translated a selection of Dickinson's letters: *Ik vind vervoering in het leven* (Utrecht, 1990). So did Louise van Santen: *Brieven: Emily Dickinson* (Baarn, 1991).

⁴⁵ Most likely Vestdijk used *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* published in 1924 and edited, with an introduction, by Dickinson's niece, Martha Dickinson Bianchi. See Martin Hartkamp's annotations to *Verzamelde gedichten*, III, 468-69, and Versteegen's comments in "Vestdijk en Emily Dickinson," 1-3. Although a selection of Dickinson's letters was published in 1931, edited by Mabel Loomis Todd, there is nothing in Vestdijk's essay to indicate that he had read or seen her letters. When the Dickinson essay was reprinted in *Lier en lancet*, Vestdijk mentioned the 1931 collection of letters in the bibliography to his "Toelichting." However, as Versteegen notes, even if between writing the essay in 1932 and reprinting it in 1939 Vestdijk had actually seen the letters, he did not correct any biographical references to Dickinson.

Even when set beside his American contemporaries, Vestdijk may be credited for being among the first to call attention to Dickinson as a modern poet. His terms of analysis, his definition of modernity in poetry, his text-oriented approach, his unremitting focus on the *art* of her poetry, and concomitantly his refusal to engage in biographical or psychological speculations concerning the origin of her art – all these betray Vestdijk's aesthetic affinity with the generation of critics who were working along similar lines in the 1920s and 1930s in the United States and who later would become influential as the New Critics: Allen Tate, Kenneth Burke, Yvor Winters, R.P. Blackmur, and John Crowe Ransom. By 1932, however, only Conrad Aiken and Tate had written important critical evaluations of Dickinson's poetry, neither of which Vestdijk seems to have read.⁴⁶ Yvor Winters' idiosyncratic "Emily Dickinson and the Limits of Judgment"⁴⁷ did not appear until 1938, while the bulk of New Critical appreciations of Dickinson's art did not come out until the mid-1950s and early 1960s, after the publication in 1955 of Thomas H. Johnson's authoritative and complete edition of Dickinson's poems. Since, as Richard B. Sewall has noted, before 1930 the preoccupation of critics was "largely biographical and the criticism fragmentary,"⁴⁸ internationally, too, Vestdijk was one of the pioneering critics who aimed to do justice to Dickinson's art. In giving a comprehensive and synthesizing reading of her oeuvre, he formulated artistic judgments that correlated with, and in many ways anticipated, influential estimations by his American contemporaries. That he did so independently, and solely on the strength of his own remarkable poetic and critical sensibility, only enhances his accomplishment, which has undeservedly gone unnoticed by Dickinson critics and scholars in the United States.

⁴⁶ Aiken's essay, "Emily Dickinson," appeared in *The Dial* in 1924; Tate's "Emily Dickinson," was first published in part in *The Outlook* in 1928, before it appeared integrally in *The Symposium* in 1932. Both essays have been reprinted in Richard B. Sewall, ed., *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, 1963), 9-15, 16-27.

⁴⁷ The essay by Winters is reprinted in Sewall, ed., *Dickinson: Critical Essays*, 28-40.

⁴⁸ Sewall, "Introduction," *Dickinson: Critical Essays*, 2.